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ABSTRACT

Teachers at an urban high school in New Brunswick (Canada) were reluctant to begin an intervention program directed at student anger and violence until they had gained input from the students themselves. A survey was conducted of the students' experience with violence and their opinions about how to address the problem. Participants were 769 (395 males and 374 females) 10th, 11th, and 12th graders, approximately 77% of the school population. Approximately 10% of the respondents reported experiencing either physical or emotional violence on a daily basis, and a further 10% reported weekly encounters. An additional 25% indicated that they had experienced violence at least once in the last 6 months. Similar responses were given when students were asked how often they were perpetrators of violence. Students reported that the sources of their outbursts were feelings of being threatened, anger at being reprimanded, or responses to drugs or alcohol. Perpetrators of violence against these students were primarily intimates, such as siblings, dating partners, or the same-sex friends of males. Most respondents considered the school a safe place and thought school personnel were supportive. The majority of students endorsed anger management training as a strategy the schools could teach to improve the situation. (SLD)

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EXPERIENCES THAT PREVENT PEACEFUL LEARNING

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ABSTRACT

Increased societal violence is a pressing concern in many schools. Educators have developed various strategies to educate against violence in attempts to slow this trend.

The approach taken in the current study was to elicit the students' input as to what their experiences of violence were and what they thought would be the most useful strategy for addressing their most pressing issues. Almost 800 high school students responded to a survey of their experiences of both physical and emotional violence.

A significant number of students reported experiencing and perpetrating violence on a daily basis. When asked what the school might do, the greatest need identified was for anger management training which the school has now implemented.

INTRODUCTION

Violence is identified as a major concern in schools today. School discipline problems have changed from focusing on relatively isolated or minor events, such as insubordination, to dealing with assaults with lethal weapons (Goldstein, Harootunian, & Close Conoley, 1994). As a result, the educational community has developed various approaches to attempt to deal with or prevent school violence.

In New Brunswick, Canada a team of researchers, associated with the Muriel McQueen Fergusson Centre for Family Violence Research, is investigating strategies for creating peaceful learning environments. This schools' team, is composed of members from the University of New Brunswick, the Provincial Department of Education, the New Brunswick Teachers' Association and four School Districts. Programs have targeted students, teachers, and parents in areas of conflict resolution, peer mediation, social skills training, and anger management at different grade levels (Cameron, Perrin, Grant, Fraser, &Taylor, 1996).

The present research focuses on violence and anger management at the high school level. Teachers at an urban high school were reluctant to begin an intervention program until they had gained input from the students themselves. Thus, this study surveyed the adolescents' experiences of physical and emotional violence. Based on information gained from teachers during focus group discussions (Cameron, 1996) it was expected that the students would indeed report experience with violence. Therefore, an additional goal was to solicit their opinions about how the school could best address this, and other presenting problems.

METHOD

Subjects

Participants were 10th, 11th, and 12th grade students at a high school in an urban neighborhood. There were 769 subjects (approximately 77% of the school). Both males (n=395) and females (n=374) were represented. Participation was voluntary.

Procedure

All students in the high school had the opportunity to fill out a questionnaire designed by staff and school district personnel. The survey consisted of questions which explored the students' experiences of both physical and emotional violence. These questionnaires were administered by teachers to entire classes and completed by the students independently. Separate forms were given to males and females. The questionnaires were identical except for the addition of one question which was directed to females only.

RESULTS

Approximately 18% of the respondents reported experiencing either physical or emotional violence on a daily basis. A further 18% reported weekly encounters. Yet a further 25% indicated that they had experienced violence at least once in the last 6 months (Figure 1). Similar responses were given when the students were asked how often they were perpetrators of violence.

Students reported the sources of their outbursts to be feelings of being threatened, drugs or alcohol, fury at being reprimanded by parents, friends lying to them, and being teased (Figure 2). The perpetrators of violence against these adolescents were primarily intimates such as siblings, dating partners, and for males, same-sex buddies.

Fortunately, most respondents indicated that school was a safe place and that they could turn to school personnel for support. However, the 38% who reported that they were aware of the violence that occurs in their school witness weapons and unacceptable acts of aggression. The most dangerous areas reported were in the halls, on the street, at the corner, and to and from school (Figure 3).

Students were not comfortable with their experiences of violence. When asked what could be done to help deal with school violence the majority of students endorsed anger management training as a desired strategy (Figure 4).

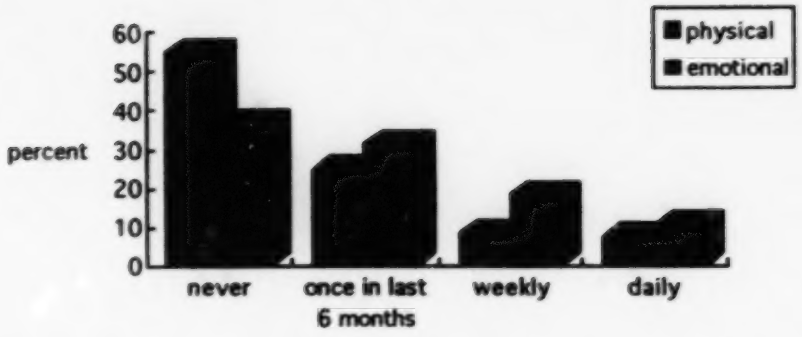

Figure 1. Percent responding to: How often are you a victim?

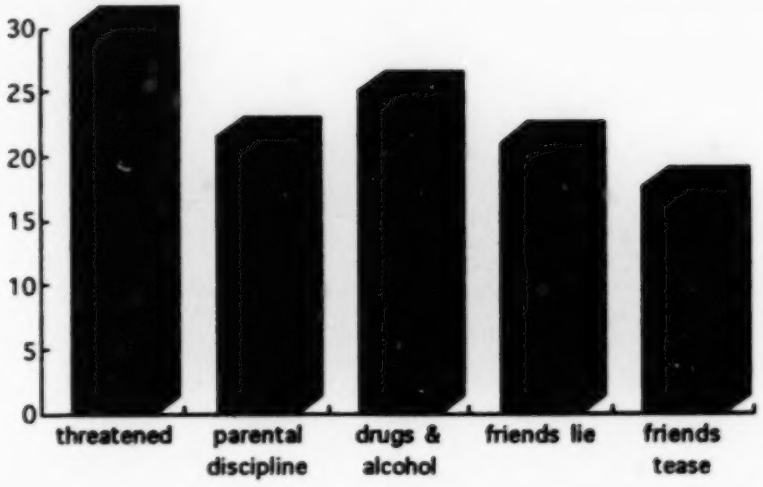

Figure 2. Percentage of students identifying circumstances where anger turns to violence.

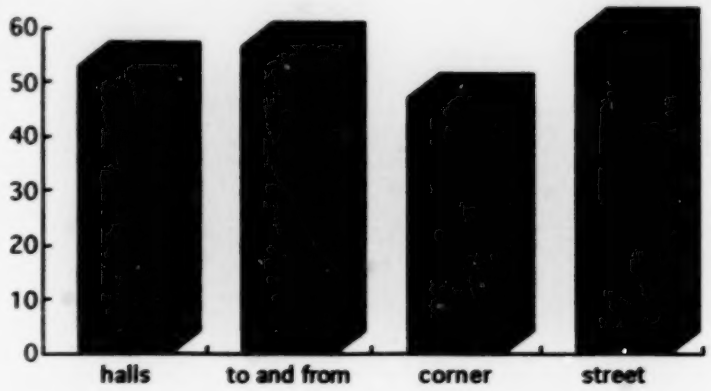

Figure 3. Percentage of students witnessing violence to and from school.

Figure 4. Percent responding positively to: What would help overcome violent tendencies?

DISCUSSION

The encouraging aspect of this survey is that slightly over half of the students reported never having experienced physical violence, and a third never encountering emotional violence. Thus, the majority of these adolescents viewed school to be a safe and secure environment.

Unfortunately, a disheartening number of high school students indicated that they were victims or perpetrators of violence daily. The most dangerous areas appear to be in the halls, on the street, at the corner, and to and from school. Although most of these locations are outside of school, over 50% of students reported witnessing violence in the halls. Clearly, violence is a common experience at school for an unacceptable number, albeit a minority, of students. Therefore, this group of adolescents deserve support to assist them in dealing with these experiences.

It is especially encouraging to note that the students were aware that they did need support, as they were not happy with their experience with violence. The majority of adolescents indicated that they believed that anger management training would be helpful in assisting them and their peers to overcome violent tendencies.

As a result of this survey, anger management programs were implemented in this high school with grade 10 students. These programs consisted of small group training with up to 10 students for 75 minute sessions, twice a week for 4 weeks. The content of these interventions was modified from the cognitive-behavioral programs of Feindler & Ecton (1986) and Cullen & Wright (1996). The results of the pre-and post-intervention evaluation indicate that training affected perceptions of the legitimacy of aggression, enhanced awareness of emotional reactivity, and increased the awareness of the consequences of aggression in the face of anger-provoking situations.

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